



## **An Introduction to Joel**

### **Lesson 4**

“That was nothing compared to what’s coming.” This was the message of Joel to his contemporaries. After a devastating plague of locusts that stripped the land bare of anything edible, Joel warns that what his fellow countrymen saw would pale in comparison to the judgment that God was sending on the nation. Using the metaphor of locusts, Joel describes a coming, terrifying army that will bring God’s wrath upon Judah for her disobedience.

We have seen that the Day of the Lord has 3 basic components: 1) God’s judgment coming upon the nations who have abused Israel 2) God’s vindication of his righteous people and 3) God’s judgment coming upon those among his own people who have acted wickedly. Obadiah focused on the first two components, and while both of those are a part of Joel as well, his book starts with a strong emphasis on the final one. All too often God’s people are ready to see God deal with the sin of others but are taken aback when they find out that God is ready to deal with their sin as well.

***In what ways do believers today tend to focus on the fact that God hates the sins of others, while failing to acknowledge that God hates my sin too?***

Joel’s solution to this problem is two-fold. First, he calls on the people to lament. He calls on them to mourn and to take seriously what has happened and what will be done to them if they do not change course. Secondly, he calls on them to repent. The mourning that God is looking for is more than just an outward show but should result in a change of life. “Sorrow that leads to repentance” as Paul would say (2 Corinthians 7:9-10); “Rend your hearts, and not your garments” Joel would say (Joel 2:12). When God calls his people out on their sin, the appropriate response is brokenness and turning from that sin.

***What are wrong reactions that people typically have to being confronted with their sin?***

***What does it look like when sorrow doesn’t lead to repentance?***

#### **I. Historical Background**

A careful study of the book of Joel should consider both what the historical situation was at the time of the writing and any other relevant details that might be helpful.

## A. Date of Joel

So when did Joel write? The answer, like the answer for Obadiah, is that it is complicated. Joel and Obadiah are probably two of the most difficult books to nail down a well agreed upon date. However, several indicators give us a reasonable guess for when this book might have been written.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. No mention of the king.

When listing out those who must mourn and repent, Joel includes the elders (1:2) and the priests (1:13), but there is no mention of a king. This does not definitively mean that there was no king at this time, but it could possibly suggest a regency council, like would have been the case during the early days of the reign of Joash (835-796 B.C.).

### 2. The enemies Judah faces.

Joel contains a list of the enemies that have attacked Judah, and the list sounds fairly early in the nation's history. Judah is concerned about Phoenicians, Philistines, Egyptians, and Edomites (Joel 3:4, 19). These countries were the main problem for Judah in her early days. Later, Assyria and Babylon would come to dominate the scene. This suggests, again, an early date for the writing.

Although there is debate over this question, in the end little is changed by how one understands when the book was written. Of far greater importance is the question of how one understands the locusts in chapter 1 and the army in chapter 2.

## B. Locust Plagues

The first chapter of Joel points back to a powerful locust plague that hit the nation hard. The second chapter builds on this plague by using this plague as a picture of a coming army that is so massive and powerful that they look like a swarm of locusts coming, and they too will be bringing a different type of destruction. However, it's likely no one in your class has ever had to face a locust plague. If we want to understand the impact of Joel's prophecy and how it would have been understood when he gave his message, we need to know what a locust plague would have meant.<sup>2</sup>

No one in America has woken up, looked out the window, and had their heart sink as millions of grass eating bugs came swarming onto their crops, destroying their livelihood. But imagine how terrifying that must have been for an ancient farmer. To one day, without any warning, see a swarm of insects headed straight for your crops and to know in your gut you were about to lose all your food and there was nothing you could do about it. So what does it look like when these tiny life-destroying monsters fly in for a snack?

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the discussion by Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 285-288.

<sup>2</sup> One way to help people understand a little bit about the impact of a locust invasion would be to show a video that helps people understand what such a plague would look like. For example, check out: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bx5JUGVahk&t=1s>. It may also be helpful to show it next week for the lesson on locusts.

Locusts continue to be a problem for places throughout the world (in fact, 2019-2021 has seen several locust swarms bringing destruction to northern Africa and the Middle East). Locusts typically stay in local areas, but under certain conditions they can multiply and join up with other groups and form large swarms that decimate entire areas. One resource gives this explanation of locust swarms: “A locust will consume its own weight each day. Locust swarms have been known to cover as many as four hundred square miles, and even one square mile could teem with over 100 million insects. If the locusts laid their eggs before being blown out to sea, the problem would recur in cycles. A single female laying her eggs in June could potentially result in eighteen million offspring within four months.”<sup>3</sup> If you were a farmer just trying to grow enough food so that you and your family didn’t die (and most people were), the sound of a million insects flying towards your field would have sent a wave of terror through you that it’s hard for us to really understand. Joel points to this recent catastrophe and warns “God did this.” He then points to the future and says “And worse is coming.”

***What is something from the current day that might be compared with the locust plague?***

***In what ways do our analogies fall short? What kind of an impact do you think a plague like this would have on the people?***

## **II. Outline**

As always, it is helpful to begin studying a book by getting a picture of what the forest looks like because that will help you to better understand the trees.

**God’s previous judgment – a plague of locusts (1:1-20)**

**God’s coming judgment – an unstoppable army (2:1-17)**

*The description of the coming army (2:1-11)*

*The need for and possibility of repentance (2:12-17)*

**God’s future restoration of his people (2:18-32)**

*God restores the covenant blessings (2:18-27)*

*God pours out his Spirit upon all (2:28-32)*

**God’s future plan for the world (3:1-21)**

*The judgement of the nations (3:1-16)*

*The restoration of Judah (3:17-21)*

As with other prophetic books, it’s important to remember that sometimes looking at themes is better than trying to lay everything out in a nice, neat outline. The prophets tend to repeat ideas and circle back around to similar thoughts rather than following a single argument all

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, note on Joel 1:4.

the way through it's conclusion like the apostle Paul. They are less like essays with a thesis and arguments and a conclusion than a collection of poems, sermons, oracles, and prophecies all centered around several key themes. It is to these themes that we now turn.

### III. Major Themes

Although this study will work through each of the four major sections of Joel going verse by verse, overviewing the major themes of the book will provide a lot of help as we get started.

#### A. God's Coming Judgment

We have talked quite a bit about God's coming judgment already, but the key point here is that God's judgment has come on Judah, and it will come again on them if they do not repent and turn from their sin. God's judgment came in the form of a natural disaster in chapter 1, and it will come in the form of a powerful enemy in chapter 2. Both circumstances, one a natural disaster and the other the result of other people, are being sovereignly used by God to deal with his people. God's control extends over all of creation, and he can use people natural events, and any other imaginable circumstance to get our attention.

***What similarities do we see between the judgment God brings on Israel and the judgment God brings on his people in the Church? How might they be different?***

#### B. The Need for True Repentance

God wants his people to take seriously the punishment that he is bringing their way (1:5, 8, 13; James 4:9). God calls on his people to mourn in the face of their judgment, but he also reminds them that he wants more than an impressive display of emotion; he wants a true, genuine change of the heart (Joel 2:13-17). Like Judah of old, we too can find ourselves going through the motions but not actually engaging with God in our hearts. God wants us to mourn over our sin, but he wants more than for us to say the right things. He wants us to have a heart that is wholly dedicated to him.

***What are some ways that we put on a show for God but don't allow our hearts to be truly changed?***

Not only does Judah need to repent, but they need to repent ***right now!*** Joel uses some colorful illustrations to make the point that being right with God takes precedence over anything and everything else (2:16-17). This national crisis of sin needed to be dealt with, and there was no need to wait!

***What excuses do people come up with to deal with their sin later?***

#### C. God's Ultimate Salvation

Joel ends on a very high note. Judah, after being battered around and sold off to the nations, she will be brought back to the land and the nations who have taken advantage of her will be required to stand before the judge in the valley of Jehoshaphat (Hebrew name meaning "Yahweh judges," 3:1-3). Not only that, but the land will be fully restored

and most importantly, God's presence will be known in the city of Jerusalem (3:17-18). After warning of the coming cleansing judgment, God ends the book of Joel on a note of hope that God's end for the nation would be a glorious one once they were willing to turn from their sin and accept him. This wonderful day is seen especially when God pours out his Spirit on the entirety of his people (2:28-32). God will one day save his people once and for all, and the nation could repent and look forward in hope to the day that God would restore them.

***How does the image of the Lord roaring (3:16) help us understand the character of God?***

***How will looking forward to God's vindication for Judah help us in our lives today?***

This week, consider reading through the book of Joel on your own several times. As you do, use your notes outline to keep your bearing, and look out for the themes that we mentioned. Then pray and ask God how what you are reading should impact you, and how your thinking about who God is should be changed as a result of reading this book.

God's power and might and justice are seen throughout the New Testament and the Old, but God's mercy and strength and his kindness and severity are all wrapped up into one as we study through these richly packed Old Testament books. What we see here is a picture of God, a picture we may not like at first, but a picture we should spend a good deal of time looking at because it is an important picture of our God. And the more we look at this picture, the more we will understand our God and the more we will come to love and fear him, and, as a consequence, the more we will come to obey him.